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Art Ontology Value: staging the ontology of art within systems of value

At stake for the project ‘Art Ontology Value’ are the definitions of what literary and art objects actually are, as opposed to what is claimed for them, and how this can be approached in literary and exhibition models without falling into the trap of reinserting these often subject-centric claims back into the objects of enquiry. As a result, my practice and writing address the same questions but in different registers and as such are connected but are not exemplars of each other. The need for an approach that does not reify either the literary or curatorial practice and avoids constructing a correlate outside of them, is stressed in the book ‘Blocked Over-Drive’:

Each curatorial and literary strategy is stimulated by the same methodology but is practised in parallel, in order to resist the temptation to utilise one practice to act as a meta-text or case study for the other. As opposed to impoverishing either the literary or curatorial practices by asking one to serve the other, this artist stages each literary or exhibition publication as an end in itself. ¹

My thesis explores a selection of literary and philosophical claims and treats them as equal objects, thus flattening out the theories into a horizontal system that circumnavigates value for an exploration of ontology. I write about these critical objects because both literature and philosophy deploy written language, as well as textual analysis being the mode in which a thesis is conducted. Through this literary register I map the claims that have been made on behalf of objects and point towards what I define as their actual status. I acknowledge, at the end of the book ‘Colliding Totality and Contingency’, that objects have a contradictory nature for writing and curatorial practice:

¹ See book, ‘Blocked Over-Drive’, p. 3.
You do not have to accept that these entities, which lie outside subjects, are mystical, unknowable and untouchable. The multiverse is neither a sublime realm of mystical beings, nor a conscious continuum, but consists of entities whose realities we are learning more about but that are not necessarily coextensive with our own. We will never have a total image of the object, world, or our relationship to the world, as even though the information we collect is becoming ever more accurate (within our current laws) it remains fragmentary or abstract. The ramification being that any collaged whole image, which is produced cannot exhaust the object whose holistic reality it knows nothing about (it may not even be a singular entity). It is the very fact that the objects and the world do not directly translate into our subjective worlds that makes these entities and, as a result, artworks effective rather than stagnant, or subsumed into our existing state of affairs.²

Alongside locating the ontological procedures of objects and their asymmetry to subjects, my thesis explores this asymmetry through its construction of critical-literary forms that posit themselves as one register of object-hood, which constructs its own internal logic without caring for a reader. There is an emphasis here on ‘care’ because my writing and curatorial practice are aware that there is likely to be a reader or viewer but my exhibitions and texts do not facilitate (care) for their interpretation towards an outside (audience).

My exhibition practice corresponds with the above written methodology but explores the ontological status of art and exhibition objects through the practice of staging. My co-authored projects, Material Conjectures, KollActiv and House of Hysteria, explore models that I propose do not make an ethical decision that mediation is bad, mediation is necessary if objects are to enter the gallery system or if they are to be framed as art in non-art spaces or locations. Instead, my co-authored projects do reposition this mediation (or staging) within what I refer to as the primary level of curatorial practice. Curatorial practice tends to position

itself between three levels and depending on which position it is weighted towards, there are very different intentions, ethics and politics at play. At the primary level we have the artwork and its construction, so authorship, and when curators over-identify with this position they become the conceptual artist whose exhibition becomes the total artwork. Historically we see this type of practice within the work of Harold Szeeman⁴ and Lucy Lippard,⁴ the former was famously rejected by Donald Judd who moved his work to Marfa in Texas, and more recently in the practices of Hans Ulrich Obrist,⁶ Jens Hoffman⁷ and Raimundas Malasauskas.⁸ This form of

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³ *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) curated by Harald Szeeman at the Kunsthalle Bern became the marker of an essay style curatorial practice that designed an overall exhibition through the artworks.

⁴ Lucy Lippard’s *Numbers Shows* between 1969-1974 portrayed curatorial practice as a performative medium, asking artists to produce works according to her criteria that they be instructional and which she often ended up constructing.

⁵ By moving to Marfa, Donald Judd actually became his auteur in rejection of curators, such as Szeeman, and did not actually change the power and bias of the curator-gallery system but, by inviting his friends to exhibit, perpetuated it.

⁶ Hans Ulrich Obrist’s *Do It* (1993 – currently) is the longest spanning and geographically sprawling exhibition project, which owes a lot to the concepts explored by Lippard and Seth Siegelaub. It speaks to the idea of a democratic methodology, as the audience are encouraged to produce the artwork but Obrist has actually hierarchically asked artists to create and the audience to fulfil his overall artwork that comprises the *Do It* project.

⁷ Jens Hoffman both critiques and affirms the curatorial canon by reenacting blockbuster exhibitions by renowned curators. *When Attitudes Became Form Become Attitudes* at CCA Wattis Institute (2012) highlighted that authorial curatorial strategies actually forge attitudes and are far from neutral, as well as re-affirming the strength of this contentious curatorial position.

⁸ For the Cyprus and Lithuanian pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), Raimundas Malasauskas produced the exhibition *Oo*, which commissioned several artists to produce a series of installations and events that succinctly fitted into and modelled his overall vision for the exhibition. This position, and its contentiousness, were considered and navigated even down to the commissioning of the *Guide Book* (2013) constructed (or rather deconstructed) by the artist Natalie Yiaxi, which hinted towards artworks and concepts without receiving the criticism a curator may have received for making these claims for the work.
curatorial practice, although often the most interesting and radical can exploit the artwork and reduce its ontological status to the conscious operations of the curator. This type of practice fails to explore the ontological nature of either art or exhibition objects because these objects actually do not care for their conscious author or spectator. An overly conscious, or interpretative, input by a curator can reify the exhibition while claiming that it is active or affective. This is due to the unavoidable acknowledgment that the curator is a subject who is effected by the very same systemic conditions as everyone else. If a curator has too much of an overarching input or signature in the final object (exhibition) then a past subject (curator) is suggesting that they can produce a form (exhibition) that can radically change the present spectator into a future subject. This is erroneous, as anyone forging a now past concept, into a present exhibition is actually producing the past’s idea of a future subject: an aesthetic that is not that dissimilar from the 1980s vision of the future, which remains the predominate and most re-imagined radical form, despite being from the past.

In terms of the secondary level of curatorial practice, I am referring to the curator’s relationship to the artist and a common, as well as obvious, instance of this being strongly affirmed is through the commercial sector. By focusing on promoting a single artist toward a collector, the commercial curator can often fail to explore their own medium of mediation and subsequently reiterate normative procedures that nod to an artwork’s value. This value is often constructed through the weight of traditional and established display models that are drawn from museum standards; many of which were set by Alfred Hamilton Barr Junior, amongst others, at MoMA in the early 20th century. This procedure values the artwork’s or artist’s innovation above that of experimental display, again negating the ontological properties of objects that do not care for their value.

The tertiary level of exhibition making is the aspect of the curatorial that is positioned towards the audience, in terms of the ‘general public’ (as opposed to the collector). Curators operating mainly within this level of practice are often concerned with either instigating community interactions or educating their audience. The pitfalls and possible models for future forms of participatory practice have been extensively covered in
Claire Bishop’s book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* and although I think Bishop points to innovative forms of participatory practice, I do not subscribe to this model because it does not appreciate the ontological status of artworks or the impossibility of catering for the general public. An audience is an abstract entity, so to construct the models in which the public interact with artworks is already to limit that audience by supposing who the viewers, as well as which interactions they want, are.

On the other side of this interaction, artworks do not care for participation and participation does not care for artworks, so it is a mutually impoverishing process in which one form becomes the prosthesis for the other, as opposed to an exercise in itself. This form of curatorial practice either produces poor forms of exhibition and art making, as the art is sacrificed for the quality of interaction, or the community fails because participants are asked to fulfil the artwork and so there is a community aesthetic without producing any longevity for that community. Museums are the obvious reference point in terms of the second tertiary model, which is concerned with educating the audience, but of course this pedagogical aspect is one that haunts much curatorial practice. I referred to the inadequate approach of educational practice to engage with the ontological aspect of the art object in the book ‘The Plot: complicit with ambivalent materials’:

A new responsibility for the provision of meaning and knowledge brings the sign and signifier into play. If the image is a language then it relies on the undiluted transference of the image’s meaning to the viewer, the viewer then digests this meaning to gain knowledge. This places emphasis on the clarity of the image’s sign(s), which has to send a pure signal to be received by the viewer. In order for this teleological process to be successful, the key signifiers have to be contained in the image’s syntax. Contrary to this operation, the signifier is dependent not only on the lucidity of its sign but also its reception in the viewer. This is where the sign’s infallibility comes into question, as each viewer is different and the sign’s message (signifier) is open to subjective interpretation. In its relation to the viewer the sign can be
Curatorial methodologies that focus entirely on educating a subject about an art object often have to resort to textual practices (wall signs, press releases, leaflets etc.) outside of the artwork to explain its import to the audience. This is due to the fact that the transmission of knowledge from sign to signified (artwork to viewer, or cause and effect) cannot be ensured because of the artwork’s asymmetry to a subject. A practice that substitutes text for the image, transforms the spectator into a reader, which undermines the possibility of encounters without text or exhibition models that deploy text in its own literary register as another object within the exhibition.

My practice claims that there can be an alternative exhibition model and curatorial position, through reinserting an emphasis towards the primary level at a tangent to itself. I situate curatorial practice alongside that of my co-authors and invited collaborators, by constructing the exhibition’s staging in-situ with the artists. This avoids the over-programmatic consciousness of the curator auteur, while not leaning towards the secondary and tertiary levels that mediate too heavily towards a spectator for which the artworks and exhibitions do not care. This horizontal position, within the primary level, is the only point at which mediation correlates with the mechanisms of the object. Each of my projects is co-authored, and this is an important acknowledgement, because there are exhibition authors here and mediation hasn’t miraculously disappeared under a united collaborative form. For example, within the project Material Conjectures the artist Dr. Dale Holmes and myself construct the staging and invite artists to exhibit together but we often argue over who should be involved with a spree of ping-pong emails with the title ‘NO’ as a productive form of working. From the ‘NO’ or ‘Nowhere’ new forms, or not, can appear. As is inferred in the projects title we pose conjectures through material and this often involves the production of diagrams for the architectural structure that will house the exhibition, often devised by myself, and suggestions for materials, mainly sourced by Dale. In this sense

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we predetermine our restrictions, for example; we decide on what and how much material we source and roughly plan what the rough size of a structure will be and the area of space it will occupy, but we can never envisage how this will play out in the space or within the act of making. Once in the space, we find that the materials with which we have restricted ourselves will not simply bend to our conscious mapping of the exhibition structure and we have to respond to the contingency of what are often quite unusual fabrics with unforeseen properties (e.g. Mylar or Ground Covers). This results in the final exhibition design occurring in-situ and never correlating fully with a predetermined plan. Of course, the authors of Material Conjectures have agency and make decisions but these are all at the primary stage of exhibition making, with the actual exhibition design cutting itself off from the secondary and tertiary levels that point themselves towards the audience. Material Conjectures’ project is concerned with the internal operations and frictions between the materials, structures and artworks within the exhibition, as opposed to interpreting these for an external subject. Any texts that we produce for the project (Press Releases, publications, presentations or performances) are often fictional, matter of fact or a series of statements and do not interpret the exhibition for a reader but explore the act of writing as another art object within the exhibition. This is why each exhibition is a material conjecture and coincides with my claim that artworks are asymmetrical to conscious subjects, so working towards a subject is unnecessary and ill qualified for staging an art or exhibition object’s ontological status.

The above emphasis, on the necessity for an exhibition practice to navigate its research processes internally to its visual register, is also why I work in series across several co-authored projects. The VIVA exhibition was the emergent form of one such co-authored strand, House of Hysteria, which is constructed out of my research and practice into ‘housing’ artworks (House), Tina Jenkins’ concern with painting as a hysterical process (Hysteria) and Mark Nader’s installation experience (Of). In distinction to Material Conjectures exploration into the contingent properties of material, House of Hysteria are concerned with painting in its expanded form. We explore painting as a surface that has its own autonomy, as well as a structure that can operate as a form of architecture or a stage for performances. Mark Nader and myself designed and constructed the
painting and platform Cyborgian Nano-Technic Transformer Unit (CNTU), as a structure that contested the use value and interactive purposes of staging. In the Press Release the CNTU was playfully referred to as a glorified display case that could be used or ignored by performers and participants:

At the Danielle Arnaud gallery opening an observer (who wishes to remain anonymous) said that they overheard the ‘Of’ in HOH describing the CNTU, as a ‘discrete object/multi-functional-unit/Swiss-army-knife/architecture’. In contrast, ‘Hysteria’ has been supposedly caught spouting off about the CNTU at the TETRAGRAMMATON: JOEY HOLDER + JOHN RUSSELL private view. After delicately sipping h/er/is Stella Artois, s/he proceeded to spit out – amongst a spray of spittle and beer – that the CNTU is ‘ruining h/er/is life’ and is ‘a site of conflict’ because it ‘will face off with h/er/is paintings’. ‘House’ has been accused of drunkenly let slip at Lynton Talbot’s and Hana Noorali’s latest show that the CNTU is a ‘glorified display case’.¹⁰

This depicted an object that does not care for its own classification (architecture, design, painting) or the interaction this may or may not invoke.

KollActiv is, in contrast, co-authored by two curators (myself and Ann Harezlak) who stage the ontological status of artworks, ephemera and archival objects within collections. We have invited artists from LA and London to join the project Concrete Plastic by interjecting in Chelsea Special Collections, London and the East of Borneo online archive, LA. This project challenges the categories of authenticity, or the original, produced through archival procedures by treating each translation in the project (original, ephemera, documentation, digital, physical and the resulting artworks that are translations of the archive) as equally autonomous. A translation becomes a new work and says nothing of the original, other than stressing that the archival object to which it was drawn had a strength to which the new work’s existence testifies. KollActiv’s

Concrete Plastic project aims to draw out the intrinsic ontological strength of an object, while playing with the usual positioning of the authors within an exhibition structure. Ann and I set up the parameters of the project but the artists respond to them within a form and medium of their own choosing, as well as one of the artists being commissioned to produce the new archive in which these works will be housed. Unlike the curator auteur models, in which artists are often invited to construct interventions, or produce architecture to a curatorial brief (because artists have a certain level of freedom that the curator is not afforded due to their institutional power), KollActiv is an independent project that is interested in enveloping and producing new hybrid practices that construct positive modes of archival staging.¹¹

To coincide with the overarching premise of the project, my exhibition practice is re-staged within a set of books in this box set because exhibition making is an important part of my position, which does not privilege the realm of the curatorial over this physical practice. This is again due to my assertion that writing acts on a different register of language and imagery to that of artistic practice. As a result, the primary mode of the curatorial, which is discourse or discursive events and publications, are important because intentions and effects of mediation need to be researched but this model operates on a different register to exhibition making. However, this distinction can often be confused in curatorial practice. For instance, in Maria Lind’s project *Performing the Curatorial* (2009–12) artists were asked to stage curatorial discourse and this inverted the structure of practice while not addressing the different power relations.¹² If artistic practice houses curatorial discourse, then not only are artworks banished from the scene but the curatorial discourse becomes the artwork. If the

¹¹ This is exemplified in exhibitions and practices that I actually really admire, from *The Art of This Century Gallery* in which Peggy Guggenheim commissioned Frederick Kiesler to design the different spaces, to Maria Lind’s commissioning of Liam Gillick to produce the architecture for *What If: Art on the Verge of Architecture and Design* at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2000). In each of these the artist is involved to free up the curator’s design but there remains an overarching synopsis of the exhibition or environment.

¹² Please refer to the publication - Lind, Maria, (ed.), *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.
curatorial becomes institution and subject matter, with artists as a validating structure, then the distinct register of art and exhibition objects that I attest to is destroyed. It is an important part of my practice to construct co-authored projects so that an exhibition practice can be explored that does not displace the artist. Within book form this practice is re-staged, while documenting the exhibition, artworks and material. As, although it does not care for the audience, it does care for the artists and artworks. This procedure also coincides with the nature of the different strands within my practice and their distinct but internalised serial processes. It was essential to develop a form that indicated the necessity of these serial processes, which remain distinct from a single archetypal exhibition or artwork, for the final practice submission. This is especially necessary as the latter (archetypal form) would sublimate the tensions between the authors and objects in my project into a homogeneous whole.

Speculative Realism and Materialism actually opened up the territory to explore the above form of object-hood but I claim that this has not been effectively investigated through an exhibition practice and this is where I decided I wanted my practice to interject. If an object is asymmetrical to consciousness, then we need to start treating objects differently, rather than continuing to assume that they are conduits for a preordained meaning (or consciousness). In subsequent literature that I have read, which was published after my submission or towards the end of my writing up, Speculative Realist and Materialist philosophers are beginning to ask this question of practice. In conversation with Ray Brassier, Suhail Malik asks the following, “That is, can the nonlinguistic material practice draw up inferences and address the questions that you propose in its own logic and medium rather than in the converted displacing of terms of linguistic inference?” My project Art Ontology Value began trying to explore this question five to six years ago and is sited through the question in the book ‘Colliding Totality and Contingency’, ‘Can an object differentiate itself from its landscape to forge itself as distinct, correlating with the operation of an artwork, but without deploying its context or communicating this

13 Ray Brassier in conversation with Suhail Malik, ‘Reason is Inconsolable and Non-Conciliatory’ ed. by Christoph Cox, Jenny Jaskey and Suhail Malik, Realism Materialism Art, Bard College: Center for Curatorial Studies; Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015, p. 229.
procedure? This question not only situates the method of exploring speculative practice through practice, as occurring prior to the recent turn towards accelerationism but also distinguishes itself from Brassier’s model for instigating accelerationism. At a recent symposium that I staged, Sonic Speculations, the artist Steve Klee began to think through this accelerationist agenda in terms of a ‘Speculative Spectator’. Klee stated that the speculative spectator is a different ontological entity from that of the individual viewer because the speculative spectator is no-one and nowhere, in the sense that they are part of a communicative and reasoning system. In order to reach this state, Brassier claims that the normative individual viewer has to go through an encounter that causes severe trauma to their phenomenological apparatus, or senses. By closing down their bodily senses, which map individuals as occupying this space as a singular embodied organism, this traumatic procedure allows spectators to register their ability to be a part of a reasoned system. Klee stated that Brassier’s trauma, which is explored in reference to noise and the artist Mattin, is actually very macho and he wants to locate a more nuanced version of the speculative spectator.

I do think that this is an important line of enquiry but I am coming at it from a different angle, as my practice is exploring speculative exhibition making as opposed to the speculative spectator. This is because if knowledge is to come from nowhere (disembodied) then we cannot begin from someone - the spectator. It is necessary to refrain from predetermining the viewing subject’s conscious limits or status, as consciousness is, ultimately, the entity we cannot map. This is why I propose a practice and writing that is interested in the networks between objects and the tension that lies between them within their staging, as opposed to exploring the unknowable knowledge network without individual. A traumatic encounter already situates the subject as a conscious individual and requires hope that they can be transformed by it.

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15 ‘Sonic Speculations for a Convivial Discussion: Up the Junction’ symposium coordinated and chaired by Kirsten Cooke with the speakers Christine Ellison, Steve Klee and Maggie Smith at ArtLacuna, Clapham Junction [28 July 2016]
Instead of assuming who the audience is and limiting their encounter, or requiring hope of a transformation, I propose a speculative exhibition maker who produces exhibitions as ends in themselves. This contributes to the nowhere and disembodied network of knowledge, from nowhere (no individual consciousness) a distinct exhibition object is produced not for us. What is at stake here for any possible viewer is a non-predetermined encounter and one that may (or may not, as not foreclosed) be provocative because it is closed off. Hence the term 'hermetic' deployed in the Press Release for the VIVA exhibition.

Pressure Chambers are artificially constructed hermetic systems that are sealed off and designed to contain substances and reactions at pressures above atmospheric conditions. Sites of forced yet contingent collisions, pressure chambers are self-contained ecologies of power. Due to their hermetic nature they can appear hostile to visitors that require air, space or compass because they are closed systems, ‘air-tight’. They can also provide ideal climates for micro-organisms that exist within their architecture: cells that have a tendency towards the alchemical or house serial practices with their own internal logic.\textsuperscript{16}

This is actually more dynamic than the often celebrated open models of exhibition making because the model is closed off, there is a dense point to react to, organise around or ignore.

Buendia fears that in a bid to demolish the link between image and spirituality the secular view has also ignored the objective reality of the image to a detrimental effect. If the image has no actuality or empirical reality in itself (ignoring the ‘Scientific Image’) then it cannot create anything concrete for individual subjects to collect around. Art can no longer create a collective or a community, as totems did for their tribes.

\textsuperscript{16} See Press Release, ‘Pressure Chamber: Nematodes’.
Images can only create random subjective hubs or islands permeated by individualistic investments.17

Whereas open exhibitions often lose this intense point by clouding it in interpretations and facilitatory intentions, my claim is that an exhibition as an object actually does not care if it is conventional or radical, so I do not infect it with these conscious operations. Of course the subjects constructing artworks and exhibitions may well want it to operate in this way but the exhibition and art objects will not succumb to these requests and do not care for the audience. This is why each exhibition is its own site, and so producing a site-specific project would be a tautology of sorts (like saying ‘soft velvet’ or as Matthew Poole states in the footnotes to his chapter ‘Specifications of Sitedness’, the rhetoric of the site-specific is the same as a ‘circular circle’) as exhibitions are already their own sites, so they cannot belong to a site outside of themselves.18 This is exemplified when Site-Specific works or exhibitions are deployed for their context (if the curator’s claim is that the show is positioned outside of the gallery) because they always circulate back into the art world context as soon as they are designated as an artwork or exhibition. Exhibitions do not require a different site to interject on because these two sites are inseparably distinct but an exhibition setting can be interesting in terms of being another object through its materiality, as opposed to its context.

Of course there is a risk here in not caring for a specific outcome, which is surmised by the curator Matthew Poole in his description of the place-site, from the same chapter as referred to above:

... the mesh or network of place-site field-flows is so tightly configured and multiply interconnected (and ever tightening and dynamically and exponentially increasing its interconnectivity) that the influence of an artwork’s hypothetical site might only


produce eddies in the fluid dynamics of the place-site field-flows which are then swept over and extinguished by the rushing torrent of the vectors of intensities, aptitudes and competencies.\textsuperscript{19}

A speculative exhibition or text, or place-site, is constructed out of what is already in existence but manifests itself at a tangent to the status-quo precisely because it does not articulate itself in the same way. This of course means that it could take a radical form, or look the same as existing models, or indeed it could just be subsumed or not recognised by the current context. This is why a serial practice is important because all it can do is keep track of what it has produced and reconfigure and rearticulate its materiality through staging. In this sense, the writing and practice within my project follow their own modes of production and become a system of many co-authored but serial tendrils or plots, which is why one of the books in my thesis is titled, ‘The Plot: complicit with ambivalent materials’. My writing and practice pursue their internal configurations in spite of any outside (prevailing system or subject). This, I claim, is more dynamic than the open processes that proliferate in a lot of curatorial discourse and counter-intuitively it is possibly more open because it does not ask the audience to understand what it is about.

To conclude, my research as practice and practice as research brings new models for staging exhibitions and writing when considering the actual nature of the object, as distinct from the consciousness of subjects. These multiple co-authored plots produce a series of tendrils, or a system, which could displace the current predominate models of producing and consuming art (whether the latter be those that encourage the ingestion of education, communities, brands or authorial curators). This affirms the statement I make in the book ‘Blocked Over-Drive’; that it is important to produce positive alternative models within feminism, philosophy, literature and art, as opposed to point at or critique the existing system. My research and practice continues to ask and aims to answer through the different registers of writing and exhibition making:

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, p. 100.
What happens when a feminist practice takes the risk in not caring for the grid of existing identities by deploying a post-human methodology? Can an artist maintain a feminist position and deploy actions and processes that, similarly to capitalism, are invisible?\textsuperscript{20} 
